

# **Accidental War**

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The Spanish American War, often dubbed “A Splendid Little War”, is one of many peculiarities in human history: a war whose cause was accidental, but whose consequences were undoubtedly designed to benefit American interests.

From the context of human history, there is no doubt that such accidents exist. Nonetheless the Spanish American War of 1898 shows the effects of technology, in this case the advent of newspaper sensationalism, on political policy. Interestingly, this effect is seen nearly a third of a century later in the advent of the Vietnam War, when the birth of modern television also went on to affect political policy. Unlike Vietnam, however, the Spanish American War is a case where President McKinley sought to avoid war - a contrast from the 1970s.

It would be foolish to compare the Vietnam War and the Spanish American War without recognizing the contextual differences within both time periods. The Spanish American War is one where US interests were primarily focused on protecting American citizens in Cuba, as well as the geopolitical implications of Cuba’s proximity to the US, and of course - the economic benefits brought forth through tourism and the sugar cane market. This is perfectly represented by the

USS Maine's mission: to protect American citizens from the barbaric tactics used by General Weyler, "The Butcher".

With that in mind, it is evident that such goals did not remain as congress passed the War Revenue Act of 1898; which promised to raise millions of dollars to fund the war. Such compromise, in my opinion, is due to the newspapers, such as the Pullitzer and the New York Journal; both of whom exploited various events such as secret letters from the spanish ambassador, letters from Officer Zigsby, etc. Such rhetoric which tried to sensationalize the events such as the explosion of the USS Maine, implicitly blamed the spanish for the explosion and didn't allow for further careful examination to continue; even as then president McKinely sought to buy time to figure out who was truly culpable for the atrocity.

The Vietnam War too was affected by technology, although the effect was reversed: the public fighting to stop the war while US economic and political interests fueled the war effort. On a similar note, the Vietnam War and the Spanish American War were both wars where the US was intervening in matters that didn't directly pertain to them. Likewise, there are undoubted similarities in the effects of media on public sentiment; as has already been noted. Differences in congress also played a role in both wars; with the conservatives trying to avoid war and the more patriotic

ones urging the president to go to war. Among the more patriotic ones was Theodore Roosevelt.

It could be argued that even if the USS Maine hadn't exploded, US involvement in Cuba was inevitable from the get-go. Furthermore, it can also be said that the Vietnam War was not as "accidental" as the Spanish American War, since the Vietnam War was a much more ideological one fought on the basis of containing the spread of communism. That said, there is also a direct contrast in the benefits and or spoils of war.

In the Spanish American War the US came out victorious with minimal soldier / civilian deaths, and various spanish territories such as Guam, Puerto Rico, Philippines, and (unofficially) Cuba. On the flip side, it can't be said that the US exited Vietnam as victorious. Although the media did a lot to sensationalize the war, a statement by one of the soldiers on the USS Maine sums up the attitude in both periods: "it is not a pleasant feeling to sit here and think that we are above mines".